
Reviewed by: Kate Fitch, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia

Those of you who were lucky enough to witness Gerry McCuskers wonderfully entertaining performance at Public Relations Institute of Australias conference in Canberra last October will remember it as one of the most popular, standing-room-only presentations at the national conference.

Talespin, the book on which the presentation was based, is equally entertaining. It offers an eclectic mix of 79 public relations disasters, primarily from the UK, USA and Australia. These include the ill-fated Vodafone-sanctioned streak at a crucial stage in an international rugby match (an interruption which probably cost New Zealand the game), the failed makeover of Tory MP William Hague, Darren Lockyers highly insensitive after dinner joke following the Canterbury Bulldogs fiasco, the McLibel case, and the Bush governments attempts at communication management during the Gulf War. It is difficult to know quite how to categorise these disasters given the cases range from classic textbook crises to lesser-known examples of things that go wrong. Most of the entries are accompanied by a short ?Lessons Learnt commentary.

Talespin illustrates for practitioners and students the ramifications of not thoroughly researching and planning campaigns. However, such preparation still might not be enough. The public relations McCusker writes of is not necessarily the public relations of strategic communication campaigns but rather of the ?anything which goes wrong and becomes a news story variety, whether it involves public relations professionals or not.

To be fair, McCusker argues for a broader definition of public relations disaster by defining it as ?anything that could catalyse embarrassing or negative publicity for any given organization (2005, p.311). He maintains that the common denominator is ?adverse media coverage and therefore public relations disaster could even embrace ?marital infidelity (2005, p.312). The danger is, this reduces public relations to the role of image and reputation management and specialised media relations, rather than seeing it as a strategic management function concerned with planned communication.

The book is very readable, but it is difficult to gauge its precise purpose. It is not really a textbook, or an academic work, despite McCuskers ?Lessons Learnt homilies. It doesn't engage with theory, offer new research or interpretations, cite references (other than some websites where certain case studies have been more extensively written about), or even provide the actual dates of the events he describes. Nor does it really offer detailed analysis demonstrating how some of these disasters might have been prevented.

Like McCuskers engaging presentation, this book reads more like a series of anecdotes. The writing style is breathless, rac, and witty with, for example, tabloid-style sub-headings such as ?sweet nothings and ?choc-blocked under a Cadburys ?philanthropy gone wrong story (2005, p.186). It appears to be a book you can dip into randomly and laugh at or marvel at the stupidity or even sheer bad luck of some of the events and personnel, not unlike some witty after-dinner conversation with industry colleagues. This is perhaps reflected in the structure of the book. Curiously ? as this doesn't make the book easy to navigate ? Talespin is arranged alphabetically around a key word rather than by themes or crisis type. This leads to some interesting juxtapositions such as the topics listed under A: Ambassadors, Announcements, Astroturfing.

There are some gems too. My favourites are the press conference that suddenly becomes obsolete, the internal document or email which accidentally gets sent to the media (one poor person actually sent a years communication plan or draft media releases) and the train full of journalists which broke down on its maiden trip. The tales are addictive in a slightly uncomfortable, almost voyeuristic way; every public relations practitioner who reads this is grateful it didn't happen to them.

McCusker views public relations as primarily ?image and impression management (2005, p.316), a position I have always found troubling. While I certainly agree with McCusker that every interaction or experience an individual has with an organisation affects their perception of that organisation, it is difficult to see how public relations can ever develop as a profession ? as indeed McCusker calls for it to do ? if it continues to be seen as overly concerned with image and reputation at the expense of engagement with, and real concern for, stakeholders. Still Talespin

About the reviewer: Kate Fitch lectures fulltime in mass communication and public relations at Murdoch University, Western Australia. Her research interests include ethical communication, media relations, and the links between public relations theory and ideas about community and democracy. She has more than ten years industry experience, including the last four (prior to joining Murdoch University) as a PR consultant
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